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SUBJECT: NORTH KIVU UPDATE

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¶1. (SBU) After several weeks of armed conflict north of Goma, MONUC now assesses the situation in North Kivu as "sensitive but under control." As of March 2, the insurgents who invaded Rutshuru (reftel) have completely vacated Chegerero, Jomba, Bunagana, and Runyoni and have retreated to temporary camps in the hills around Jomba and Runyoni. Although there have been isolated incidents of looting on the Kanyabayonga-Rutshuru road, IDPs continue to return to the area. The OCHA director in the region, however, told the Ambassador in Goma March 1 that he remains very worried about the humanitarian situation given the large number of IDPs remaining in various parts of the province and the fact that the planting season will end very soon. Any IDPs who do not make it to their home areas in time, essentially now, risk being unable to plant successfully in the current season, exacerbating food shortage problems in the region.

¶2. (SBU) Tensions, however, remain high in the province. A variety of local community leaders expressed concerns to the Ambassador during a February 28 - March 1 visit to Goma that violent confrontations could occur again. Predictably, such concerns tended to focus on renegade General Nkunda and those combatants loyal to him, or harassment from other ethnic or military groups, depending on the political views and ethnic affiliation of the person doing the talking. The underlying problems that led to the eruption of violence in January have not been resolved.

¶3. (SBU) All interlocutors in North Kivu offered to the Ambassador during his visit praise for the performance of the MONUC Indian Brigade in response to the January violence. Prevailing sentiment was clearly that the effective Indian Brigade response was the major factor helping to prevent the violence from escalating and spreading further. Most of the FARDC 83rd Brigade (an ex-ANC brigade), whose elements comprised much of the insurgency, have since been relocated to the former integration center at Mushaki with the help of MONUC's North Kivu Brigade. The FARDC Second Integrated Brigade has replaced the Fifth Integrated Brigade in North Kivu, but 1300 soldiers from the Fifth Brigade still remain in Goma's Mobanga neighborhood awaiting redeployment. They and their family members are without any means of support, and their continued presence in Goma constitutes a humanitarian problem with potential security implications. There are also a few elements of the Fifth Brigade in more remote deployments in the province awaiting imminent replacement by the Second Brigade troops. These troops will presumably join those waiting in Goma for transportation. MONUC is planning joint operations with the Second Brigade in the coming weeks to address remaining sensitive areas in the run-up to elections.

